

VZCZCXRO8518  
OO RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH  
DE RUEHGO #0220/01 0840927  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
O 240927Z MAR 08 ZDK TO ALL CTG NUM SVCS  
FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7336  
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1019  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1794  
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 4805  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4570  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8110  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5671  
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 1399  
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1477  
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 0257  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/DIA WASHDC  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 3582  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1430  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000220

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS  
DEPT PLEASE PASS TO USAID - CHERYL JENNINGS  
BANGKOK FOR USAID/RDMA  
PACOM FOR FPA  
TREASURY FOR OASIA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/24/2018  
TAGS: [EAID](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#)  
SUBJECT: BURMA: REGIME TELLS NGOS TO KEEP A LOW PROFILE

REF: RANGOON 048

RANGOON 00000220 001.18 OF 003

Classified By: Economic Officer Samantha A. Carl-Yoder for Reasons 1.4  
(b and d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Although most NGOs continue to conduct business as usual, the Burmese Government in recent weeks has encouraged them to maintain a low profile until after the May referendum. Politics played a role in the recent requests: Secretary 1 and the Minister of Industry 1, both of whom

SIPDIS  
question the political allegiance of NGOs, continue to butt heads with officials from the Ministry of Health, which has memorandums of understanding with approximately 80 percent of NGOs working in Burma. The Minister of Health on March 3 requested health NGOs to keep a low profile for their outreach activities. Regional officials in Mandalay Division and Mon State took this directive to a new level, asking NGOs to either postpone activities until after the May referendum or to hold them in government health offices. Mandalay officials also informally requested several NGOs to temporarily close their health clinics; only Population Services International (PSI) received a formal request and shut down its drop-in clinic on March 5. NGOs continue to operate in Burma, but plan to scale back outreach efforts until after the referendum. PSI officials expect to reopen the Mandalay clinic in the next two weeks. End Summary.

Deflecting Regime Interest

-----

¶2. (C) Currently, approximately 50 international NGOs work in Burma, providing humanitarian assistance to Burma's needy. Approximately 80 percent of these NGOs run health programs, providing services and treatment to the Burmese under the purview of the Ministry of Health. Although the Ministry of Health supports these programs, some of regime's more hard-line leaders have recently questioned the need for humanitarian assistance and the scope of the NGOs' work in country. Andrew Kirkwood, Director of Save the Children, told us that newly appointed Secretary 1, Lt. General Tin Aung Myint Oo, and Minister of Industry 1 U Aung Thaung, have begun to intimate that several health NGOs are working to undermine Burma's political stability. In the past few weeks, they have placed increasing pressure on the Ministry of Health to "control NGO operations."

¶3. (C) While the Ministry of Health has been experiencing increasing pressure from hard-liners for last few months, the recent announcement of an upcoming May referendum acted as a catalyst for additional pressure, Kirkwood explained. In February, the regime accused International Alliance for HIV/AIDS of assisting the NLD and shut down its outreach efforts in Pakkoku, Magwe Division. (Note: The September demonstrations originated in Pakkoku. The GOB continues to monitor the area closely. End Note.) To deflect criticism of other NGO activities, the Minister of Health on March 3 issued a directive that all health-related NGOs must maintain a low profile until after the May referendum. The Minister of Health reiterated this directive in a March 14 meeting with NGO directors in Nay Pyi Taw, emphasizing that the directive did not mean that NGOs had to stop activities, but should take precautions to avoid unnecessary attention.

#### Taking it to the Next Level

-----

¶4. (C) According to NGO contacts, several Divisional Health RANGOON 00000220 002.4 OF 003

Directors took a hard-line interpretation of the Minister's directive. Brian Agland, Country Director of CARE, told us that the Health Directors in Mandalay Division and Mon State met with several NGOs, including CARE, Save the Children, and International Alliance, in mid-March and informally requested that the NGOs temporarily close down their drop-in clinics. While the NGOs closed their clinic doors, they continue to receive and treat patients, Agland stated. Until they receive a formal request from the GOB (which they will not ask for), the NGOS will continue to provide humanitarian assistance, he declared.

¶5. (C) In addition to asking NGOs to close clinics, the Mandalay Divisional Health Director also requested NGOs to postpone outreach activities until after May. When NGOs countered that outreach activities provided vital information about health risks and behavior, the Director agreed but noted that any NGO outreach should be conducted in the Ministry's regional and local offices. Naida Passion, Health Director for Save the Children, explained that the compromise was a win-win since NGOs could continue to conduct educational programs and GOB officials could attend to learn more about the programs. "The NGOs have nothing to hide. By holding outreach in GOB buildings, the NGOs can show the hard-line officials that they are transparent," she declared.

#### PSI Clinic Closed Temporarily

-----

¶6. (C) PSI, an international NGO that provides health assistance for HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and reproductive health in 300 out of 324 townships, was directly affected by the Mandalay Divisional Health Director's overzealousness. According to PSI Country Director John Hetherington, the Mandalay Divisional Health Director on March 3 verbally asked PSI to shut its drop-in center in

Mandalay and provided no justification for the request. In response, PSI officials asked the Health Director to submit a formal request in writing. The PSI office in Rangoon on March 4 received a formal letter requesting "temporary closure" of its clinic. PSI shut the Mandalay clinic the following day.

17. (C) PSI officials continue to work with the Ministry of Health to ensure a timely reopening of the clinic. Hetherington met with the Minister of Health on March 10 and the Director of the National AIDS Program on March 14 to appeal the Mandalay Division Health Director's order. Both officials told Hetherington that that the Health Director was "out of line" and that they would work with him to reverse the decision. PSI Deputy Director Dr. Tin Maung Tun met with the Mandalay Health Office on March 17, where he was told that once PSI registered its clinic, it could reopen its doors. Hetherington lamented the bureaucratic paperwork, but noted that the request for documentation was a way for the Divisional Health Director to save face. The Ministry of Health supports PSI's activities and did not intend for the clinic to be closed, he explained. Hetherington expects the clinic to reopen by the end of March.

#### NGO Perceptions

18. (C) During meetings with NGOs during the past week, we observed that while NGO officials were frustrated with the inconsistent interpretations of the Minister of Health's

RANGOON 00000220 003.6 OF 003

directive, they believed the working environment would return to normal by the end of May. David Allen, Director of World Concern, explained that the environment for NGOs was always changing and that NGOs that work in Burma have learned to adapt to the government's whims. While the current suspicion around NGO activities makes it harder for some NGOs to operate in certain areas, NGOs overall continue to provide vital humanitarian assistance to the Burmese, he emphasized. Merlin Medical Country Director Jan Teversham agreed, noting that problems have arisen in the past and NGOs have had to halt operations until suspicion about activities died down. In the end, NGOs have been able to resume activities with only minor delays. International NGO officials see no reason why the current situation is any different, she concluded.

#### Comment

19. (C) International NGO officials are convinced that pressure on the Ministry of Health and health-related NGOs will die down after the May referendum. Although Burma's operating environment can be difficult, NGOs have successfully maintained operations over the past 15 years, providing assistance to Burma's poor when the government fails to do so. While the latest GOB interest in NGO activities and the inconsistent interpretations of the Minister's directive creates new challenges for many NGOs, these officials do not believe that the current situation will last. NGOs have adopted a wait-and-see approach, which enables them to adapt to the changing environment while providing humanitarian assistance to those in need.

VILLAROSA